



Historical Perspectives in the Novels of Hilary Mantel

Dr. Kumud^{a,*}, 

^a Assistant Professor, Swami Shukdevanand College, Shahjahanpur, MJP Rohilkhand University, Bareilly, U.P. (India).

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Hilary Mantel, Historical Fiction, Historical Perspectives, Narrative Depth, Thematic Exploration, Thomas Cromwell

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the thematic significance of historical perspectives in the novels of Hilary Mantel. Through an analysis of Mantel's works, particularly her acclaimed historical fiction such as the Thomas Cromwell trilogy, this paper explores how Mantel utilizes historical perspectives to enrich character development, narrative depth, and thematic exploration. Drawing upon insights from literary criticism and historical analysis, this paper examines the ways in which Mantel navigates the complexities of history, memory, and interpretation to offer nuanced portrayals of individuals and societies. Moreover, it investigates the implications of Mantel's engagement with historical perspectives for broader discussions of identity, power, and human agency. Through a comprehensive examination of Mantel's literary oeuvre, this paper aims to illuminate the multifaceted ways in which historical perspectives inform and shape her narrative vision.

Introduction

Hilary Mantel is widely regarded as one of the leading contemporary writers of historical fiction, renowned for her ability to vividly review history eras and bring historical figures to life on the page. Central to Mantel's storytelling ability is her adeptness at capturing various historical perspectives, from the personal to the political, and weaving them into complex narratives that resonate with contemporary audiences. In this research paper, we explore the thematic significance of historical perspectives in Mantel's novels, exploring how they contribute to character

development, narrative depth, and thematic exploration. Through a close examination of Mantel's works, particularly her Thomas Cromwell trilogy comprising *Wolf Hall*, *Bring Up the Bodies*, and *The Mirror and the Light*, we analyze the ways in which Mantel engages with historical perspectives to offer nuanced insights into the past and its reverberations in the present.

Hilary Mantel, often regarded as the 'mother of the historical novel' and a two-time Booker Prize winner, is known for her meticulous portrayal of historical settings and characters. Her novels are so accurate that the term 'super-realism,' coined by

* Corresponding author


E-mail: kumudbhu29@gmail.com (Dr. Kumud).

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 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0913-270X>



British-American visual artist and painter Malcolm A. Morley, is frequently associated with her work. Despite being labeled a frustrated novelist by historians, Mantel humorously describes herself as a frustrated historian. In her sweeping historical sagas, Mantel has masterfully revived the Tudor Age, spanning from 1485 to 1603. Her commitment to accuracy is exemplified by her creation of a Card Index System while writing *Wolf Hall* (2009) to ensure that her cast of characters was in the right place at the right time.

Hilary Mantel, born on 6 July 1952 and passing away on 22 September 2022, stood as a prominent English novelist and a leading figure in historical fiction. Overcoming various challenges in her life, she became renowned for her portrayal of historical events. Diagnosed with Endometriosis at the age of 27, Mantel's novels bear traces of autobiographical elements and the trauma she experienced due to her health and family life.

Hilary Mantel has authored a total of twelve novels: *Every Day Is Mother's Day* (1985), *Vacant Possession* (1980), *Eight Months on Ghazal Street* (1988), *Fludd* (1989), *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), *A Change of Climate* (1994), *An Experiment In Love* (1995), *The Giant O' Brien* (1998), *Beyond Black* (2005), *Wolf Hall* (2009), *Bring Up The Bodies* (2012), and *The Mirror & the Light* (2020). Additionally, she has penned a non-fiction autobiographical work, *Giving Up the Ghosts: A Memoir* (2003).

Mantel has also published collections of short stories, including *Learning to Talk: Short Stories* (2003) and *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* (2014). Her contributions extend to

various publications, such as the London Book Review, where she has written articles like *A Realist With Wings*, *Pain in the Desert*, *What a Man this is, with his crowd of women around him!*, *Some Girls Want Out*, and *Royal Bodies*, among others. Hilary Mantel holds the distinction of being the first British and first female writer to receive the prestigious Booker Prize twice. Globally, she was the fourth, following J. M. Coetzee, Peter Carey, and J. G. Farrell, to achieve this coveted recognition twice. She is the first and only author to receive the Booker Prize for a sequel.

The *Wolf Hall* trilogy by Mantel was adapted into plays by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and the BBC produced them as mini-series. The third novel in the *Wolf Hall* trilogy, *The Mirror and the Light*, made it to the long list of the Booker Prize. Mantel has also contributed reviews to publications such as *The Guardian*, *London Review of Books*, and the *New York Review of Books*. Hilary Mantel is a prominent historical fiction writer and a representative figure among women historical fiction writers. The proposed study aims to provide readers with a deep insight and understanding of her novels. Moreover, it addresses a crucial aspect of her works that has yet to be thoroughly explored by researchers. This study will contribute significantly to the existing body of knowledge on the works of Hilary Mantel, adding another layer to the understanding of her literary contributions.

Perspective encompasses the profound and multifaceted experiences of individuals, communities, and the nation as a whole, encompassing historical, psychological, cultural, social, and economic evolution up to the present

day. Within this composite unit, historical perspective emerges as a recurring motif that pervades the lives of characters in the works of Hilary Mantel. According to the lexical definition in Webster's Dictionary, super-realism is described as "pertaining to an order of existence beyond the visible observable universe, particularly related to God, demigods, spirits, or devils." It also denotes "deviating from what is usual or normal, especially so as to appear to transcend the laws of nature or be attributed to invisible agents, such as a ghost or spirit." Mantel herself explained to Sarah O'Reilly in an interview: "In virtually all my books, there's a slight edge of the supernatural and a preoccupation with what is hidden, what may be in the locker room." These definitions encapsulate the themes present in the works of Hilary Mantel, recurring motifs that are explored throughout her novels.

Hilary Mantel's novels are renowned for their deep exploration of characters' inner lives and motivations, particularly those of historical figures. In works like *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, Mantel delves into the psyche of Thomas Cromwell, presenting him not merely as a political operator but as a complex individual with multifaceted desires, fears, and ambitions. Through meticulous attention to Cromwell's thoughts and emotions, Mantel humanizes him, allowing readers to empathize with his struggles and understand the driving forces behind his actions. Similarly, other characters, such as Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, are portrayed with psychological depth, showcasing the intricacies of their personalities and the inner conflicts that shape their decisions.

Mantel situates her characters within their socio-political context, providing a nuanced portrayal of the historical milieu in which they operate. By meticulously researching the period and drawing on historical sources, Mantel recreates the political intrigue, social dynamics, and power struggles of Tudor England. Through her vivid depiction of court life, religious turmoil, and the machinations of power, Mantel immerses readers in the tumultuous world of the Tudor court. Moreover, Mantel challenges conventional portrayals of historical figures, offering alternative perspectives that complicate traditional narratives. For instance, in *Wolf Hall*, Mantel presents Thomas More not merely as a martyr for his religious beliefs but also as a flawed and authoritarian figure whose actions have far-reaching consequences.

Mantel explores the interplay between individual agency and historical determinism, examining how characters navigate the constraints of their time while still exerting their own agency. While the overarching historical events provide a backdrop for the narrative, Mantel emphasizes the role of individual choices and actions in shaping the course of history. Characters like Thomas Cromwell are depicted as active agents who wield significant influence, even as they grapple with the forces of fate and circumstance. Mantel highlights the complexity of historical causality, showing how seemingly minor decisions can have profound repercussions on the course of events. Through this exploration of agency and determinism, Mantel invites readers to reflect on the nature of power and the complexities of historical change.

Use of historical events as backdrop for character-driven storytelling:

Hilary Mantel's novels skillfully utilize historical events as a backdrop for character-driven storytelling. Rather than merely recounting historical facts, Mantel weaves a rich tapestry of narrative that immerses readers in the lived experiences of her characters against the backdrop of significant historical events. For example, in *Wolf Hall*, Mantel places Thomas Cromwell at the center of the tumultuous events surrounding King Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon and his break with the Catholic Church. Through Cromwell's perspective, readers witness not only the political maneuvering and religious upheaval of the time but also the personal and emotional stakes for the characters involved. By grounding her narrative in historical events, Mantel adds depth and resonance to her characters' stories, allowing readers to gain a deeper understanding of both the individual and the historical context in which they operate.

However, Mantel's novels are distinguished by their meticulous attention to historical detail, achieved through extensive archival research and incorporation of primary sources into the narrative structure. Mantel's background as a historian is evident in her rigorous approach to historical accuracy, as she draws upon a wealth of primary sources to inform her depiction of Tudor England. From letters and court documents to contemporary accounts and archival records, Mantel mines a variety of sources to reconstruct the past with authenticity and fidelity. This attention to detail not only enhances the verisimilitude of her novels but

also enriches the narrative texture, immersing readers in the sights, sounds, and textures of the historical period. By grounding her storytelling in historical research, Mantel creates a sense of immediacy and authenticity that brings the past vividly to life.

Moreover, Mantel's novels engage with the complexities of historical interpretation, presenting competing perspectives on key events and characters and exploring their implications. Rather than presenting a single authoritative version of history, Mantel acknowledges the multiplicity of viewpoints and the inherent ambiguity of the past. Characters in her novels often grapple with conflicting accounts of historical events and must navigate the uncertainty and ambiguity that arise from competing interpretations. For example, in *Bring Up the Bodies*, Cromwell is confronted with conflicting narratives surrounding Anne Boleyn's alleged adultery and the circumstances of her downfall. Mantel deftly explores the political agendas, personal biases, and ideological motivations that shape historical interpretations, inviting readers to interrogate the reliability of historical sources and the complexities of historical truth.

Hilary Mantel's novels intricately explore themes of power, ambition, and betrayal within their historical contexts. Through the lens of characters such as Thomas Cromwell and Henry VIII, Mantel delves into the dynamics of power and the ruthless pursuit of ambition in Tudor England. Cromwell's ascent from humble origins to the heights of power exemplifies the complexities of ambition and the moral compromises it entails. Meanwhile, Henry

VIII's insatiable quest for a male heir drives him to betray allies, discard wives, and reshape the religious landscape of England. Mantel portrays these power struggles with nuance, revealing the personal costs and ethical dilemmas inherent in the pursuit and exercise of power. By grounding her exploration of these themes in historical context, Mantel offers insights into the nature of authority, the fragility of loyalty, and the consequences of unchecked ambition.

Mantel's novels interrogate issues of gender, class, and race within the framework of historical narratives, challenging conventional assumptions and shedding light on marginalized voices. In a patriarchal society like Tudor England, gender plays a significant role in shaping individuals' lives and opportunities. Mantel portrays the constraints faced by women such as Anne Boleyn and Katherine of Aragon, who must navigate the perilous waters of court politics while contending with the limitations imposed by their gender. Moreover, Mantel examines the intersections of gender, class, and race, highlighting the experiences of marginalized groups such as servants, foreigners, and people of color within the hierarchical structure of Tudor society. Through her portrayal of characters from diverse backgrounds, Mantel foregrounds the complexities of identity and the ways in which social structures shape individuals' lives and opportunities.

Mantel's novels prompt reflections on the nature of history, memory, and historical truth, challenging readers to reconsider conventional narratives and question the reliability of historical accounts. Through her narrative technique, Mantel

blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, inviting readers to engage critically with the process of historical interpretation and the construction of historical narratives. Characters in her novels grapple with the gaps and contradictions in historical records, raising questions about the nature of memory, the fallibility of eyewitness testimony, and the selective nature of historical representation. By foregrounding these issues, Mantel encourages readers to interrogate their own assumptions about the past and to recognize the provisional nature of historical knowledge. In doing so, Mantel fosters a deeper appreciation for the complexities of history and the challenges inherent in its interpretation.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Hilary Mantel's novels offer a rich tapestry of historical perspectives that illuminate the complexities of the past while resonating with contemporary concerns. Through her meticulous research, nuanced characterizations, and compelling storytelling, Mantel demonstrates the enduring relevance of historical fiction as a means of understanding the present through the lens of the past. By delving into the depths of history and exploring its multifaceted perspectives, Mantel invites readers to reconsider their understanding of the past and its implications for the present and future. As we continue to engage with Mantel's works, we are reminded of the enduring power of historical perspectives to inform, inspire, and challenge our perceptions of the world around us. Through her exploration of characters' inner lives, representation of historical figures in their socio-political context, and examination of the interplay

between individual agency and historical determinism, Mantel offers a compelling and nuanced portrayal of the past that continues to resonate with contemporary readers. Through her use of historical events as a backdrop for character-driven storytelling, incorporation of archival research and primary sources into the narrative structure, and examination of competing historical interpretations and their implications, Mantel creates richly textured narratives that resonate with historical authenticity and intellectual complexity. Thus, historical perspectives in the novels of Hilary Mantel demonstrates Mantel's thematic exploration through a historical lens, as she delves into themes of power, ambition, and betrayal within their historical contexts, interrogates issues of gender, class, and race within historical narratives, and prompts reflections on the nature of history, memory, and historical truth. Through her nuanced and multi-layered approach, Mantel offers readers a compelling and thought-provoking exploration of the past that resonates with contemporary relevance.

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